Defining Religion A Humanities Perspective

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Abstract

This contribution aims to address the opportunities for empirical theologians to deal with the definitions of religious texts, beliefs, and practices from a humanities perspective. After pinpointing the issue of definition as one, in which interpretation is constitutive, three paragraphs elaborate the discussion of such a humanities approach to religion. Firstly, it is made clear that semiotic analysis offers a method to clarify the significance of religious texts, beliefs, and rituals at three elementary levels of meaning exchange. Secondly, it is demonstrated that discourse-analysis offers a proper method to clarify how various owners of religious definitions interact in pursuit of their interests. Thirdly, attention is drawn to the exigency of studying justification claims in religion, which is crucial in demonstrating the relevance and significance of empirical research to society. In looking back, it is argued that the indicated humanities perspective is able to avoid the many pitfalls in defining religion, and contributes to the development of empirical theology and is relevant to current and forthcoming opportunities for research in religion.

Keywords

Introduction

The definition of religion and the empirical exploration of its beliefs, texts and practices represents a complex problem in the study of religion. If one thing is obvious, it is the fact that clear-cut definitions of religion are not available, at least not without an argued choice that from the outset delimits theoretical or analytical ambitions to specify religions' essence, main function

or generic meaning. Preferences in definition and measurement depend on priorities in choice of theory and research design. Taking into account that there are diverging methodological views regarding academic discipline and research-paradigm as well, the more technical questions of operationalisation, measurement and data analysis are often left as matters of pragmatic choice. What complicates matters of definition and measurement significantly, is the fact that spiritual beliefs, holy texts and ritual practices appear to lose a strong embedment in the social- and cultural settings of many Western countries. Not only does the phenomenological landscape of religion change rapidly, but so do the institutions and disciplines from which religion is studied. Disciplines of theology, religious studies, anthropology, comparative religion and philosophy have established fruitful forms of cooperation in academic curricula and benefit strongly from mutual challenges in research. The traditional interdisciplinary alliances of practical theology and social- and pedagogic sciences have become supplemented by newcomers, such as the cognitive- and neurosciences and even medical- and nursing disciplines. However innovative and beneficial these forms of cooperation are, they do not necessarily contribute to a convincing unitary paradigm in the academic study of religion. Thus, even if empirical theology displays an innovative scientific interest in religion and gives ample evidence of autonomy in the handwork of empirical research, it remains just one of many perspectives from which the issue of religious definition is raised but obviously cannot be settled.

That theological thought offers the most appropriate academic outlook to deal with these conceptual and methodical matters of religion may seem obvious, but it is also open to question. Three observations can be raised to question the aptitude of empirical theologians in dealing with these issues. Firstly, and foremost, an elective affinity of religious concept and confessional creed has existed over the ages and turns any theological attempt to define religion under the likely suspicion of a preference for essentialist definitions that coincides with established tenets. Pastoral or practical theology has long been considered an application of systematic theology that aimed at pastoral professionalism, be it at service to, or at critical distance from society. Even though empirical theology has, since then, displayed clear signs of academic autonomy in appropriating a theoretical stance of its own and did develop methodological proficiency, it largely remains a discipline of Christian theological reflection and interpretation (Schilderman 2001; 2004). As such, it rather obviously assumes a predilection for substantive definitions of religion that are tributary to established confessional vocabularies. Secondly, it is good to keep in mind that the issue of religious definition as a basic scholarly requirement becomes a necessity only in systematic confrontation with other spiritual beliefs and

practices. Whilst traditional theology framed this confrontation with plurality as a normative problem of heresy and orthodoxy, and dealt with it in confessional terms; religious studies requires *per se* analytical definitions to act as 'tertium comparationis' in a side-by-side comparison of beliefs and practices within their respective cultural embedment. This latter scholarly tradition of comparative religion evolved in disciplines such as the history and phenomenology of religion, cultural anthropology and ethnography. These disciplines are well-established and have attained a methodical proficiency that, up until now, has only rudimentarily been integrated in systematic theology. This puts empirical theologians for far-reaching questions regarding an incorporation or exclusion of comparative religion within its theological framework. Thirdly, it was only since the 1960s that practical theology started to develop methodological expertise in studying the empirical characteristics of beliefs and practices autonomously. Fruitful cooperation with social sciences, such as psychology, sociology and pedagogy, enable empirical theologians to develop their discipline in a direction that deals with religion analytically and empirically in ways that are comprehensible in larger academia and are acceptable to scientific fora. However, in doing so, empirical theology also makes itself susceptible to functionalist types of religious definition that depend on the operationalisation and theoretical claims of the respective social scientific theory. This includes risks of poorly operationalised variables in research designs, in which religion is just one of many variables that only indirectly, or occasionally, contributes to religious theory building and testing.

Observations like these challenge the identity of empirical theology as a viable discipline with both a clear theological identity and an empirical autonomy that contributes to the interdisciplinary study of religion. One positive way to characterise a theologically-informed empirical approach to religion, is to consider empirical theology's roots in the broader setting of humanities. Such an approach can contribute to the quest for an 'explanatory interpretation-paradigm' in the study of religion, as proposed by Jensen (Jensen 2009). To define humanities as a discipline of its own introduces a host of questions, but many will agree that mans' self-interpretation from his own culture, offers an obvious ingredient in any theological or philosophical definition. Whereas Renaissance humanists still demarcated 'studia humanitatis' from 'divine studies'; by the nineteenth century the humanities were understood to have demarcated philosophy and theology on the one hand, from the natural or reflective sciences on the other. At present, various national interpretations of humanities stand side-by-side ('human studies', 'liberal arts', 'lettres', 'Geisteswissenschaften') and to some extent, they hinder a univocal understanding. The designation 'humanities' still assumes a host of methodical approaches in religion, such as

the critical-historical tradition in exegesis, the logical reconstruction of religious language in formal semantics, the use and communication of religious signs in semiotics, and the hermeneutical study of religious belief interpreted from its life-world relevance. The object of humanities is typically understood to be oriented at culturally-generated meaning, whether in terms of history, or in confrontation with texts, artefacts, actions, or events that induce processes of signification and foster self-reflection. Here, humanities are understood as readings of culture that aim at an explanation of human identity. This — somewhat continental — approach to humanities is obviously motivated by Enlightenment ideals of education ('Bildung'). According to Dilthey, the task of humanities is to offer self-reflection, mutual understanding and broadening of experience. Following Gadamer, its task is transfer of culture, formation, and support of 'common sense'. A normative stance is characteristic for humanities as well as is for instance reflected in claims regarding an imminent social identification of human identity with needs satisfaction (Ritter), the assumed prevalence of a 'cultural dementia' that deteriorates political judgment (Lübbe), or apparent strategies that distort communication (Habermas). The study of these controversies obviously turns the humanities into a hermeneutically-oriented discipline, which requires methodological tools in the study of interpretation processes ('Verstehen', 'Sinnerschließung') (Scholtz 2000; Seebohm 2004). Within such an understanding of humanities, theologically-informed research can be said to analyse the historic-, ritual-, and textual heritage of a particular religion, with an aim to interpret social and cultural issues from a critically discussed 'origin and destiny' of mankind. Whilst this perspective obviously cannot abstain from its own cultural and spiritual background; the significance of its research aims is not limited to the confessional claims that a particular religion holds. It also aims at an understanding of the route that mankind traverses within these religions through its texts and traditions. Whilst these normative claims themselves can be sufficiently understood and supported within the original beliefs and practices of the life-world, a humanities approach would describe, analyse and compare exactly this process of substantiation within and between the religions. It aims to contribute to a theory of religion that enables an interpretation of regulative goals of humanity, such as embedded in notions like quality of life, peace, truth, happiness, justice, solidarity, sustainability or human rights. Thus, a humanities approach to the study of religion emphasises both an empirical- and a normative concern to contribute to the formation of judgment within religions' habitat of the life-world.

In more formal terms, this humanities approach can be characterised in terms of three dependencies, from which the concept of religion can be

discussed. Firstly, it can be maintained that any conceptualisation of religious beliefs and practices is tributary to the inherited forms of meaning, which represent the obvious cultural assumptions without which any interpretation would remain futile. It raises the question of whether any study of religion can withdraw itself from the basic acts of signification that are constitutive of any religions' beliefs and practices. Obviously, this somewhat rhetoric question of cultural dependency represents the most accepted and typical issue in the study of religion that problematises the concept of religion. Secondly, the humanities' study of religion is subjected to the power formations, in which a religion has its 'habitat', and that implicitly or explicitly filter or enforce certain interpretations as more valid, authentic or reliable as compared to others. This point of critical ideological concern has been raised in the history of the study of religion time and again, but was only up until recently considered a front stage problem in the study of religion. Thirdly, and finally, the study of religion is bound to deal with issues of truth, fairness, taste and other standards of practical reason, without which any aim of interpretation would lack motive or aim. Obviously, this third dependency remains a controversial issue in the study of religion, as it runs risks of re-introducing the ideological claims of the studied religion, or requires integration of a philosophical competence in religious studies that attunes only with great difficulty to the empirical grass-roots expertise of anthropological research traditions. In the following, this three-fold dependency of a humanities' approach in its definition of religion will be explored. This contribution does not constitute a definition of religion, or of its beliefs and practices. Nor will the methodological requirements regarding operationalisation or analysis that could — and by all means, should — be demanded in a discussion of empirical research. For now, the aim is merely to explore and discuss some opportunities to define religion from a typical humanities' interest of interpretation. In doing so, the hope is to characterise empirical theology positively, as the type of empirical research that studies the interpretation of the 'human element' in life and its religious opportunities to bestow it with meaning. As such, it remains a discipline that studies self-reflected religion that in each age and context needs to re-appropriate its beliefs and re-explore its practices in order to be understood.

Forms of Meaning

Any religious text, belief or practice offers a representation that is reflected in a mental image that informs about religion. Asking what exactly is believed or why something is practiced, is already at least one step ahead of the meaning

that is being expressed. This basic semiotic concern to perceive the basic forms of meaning that are embedded in signs, texts, codes, and metaphors safeguards the discussion of definition from bypassing the obvious meanings that are already being modelled before our very eyes. As such, semiotics refers to an established modern discipline with ancient analytical roots (Manetti 2010). For some scholars in religion, observations like these that emphasise constraints of local signification, offer a motive to give up any effort of definition. If one is subordinated to historic-, linguistic- and contextual contingencies — so it is maintained —, why not give up the ambition to pursue definitions in the first place? Which concerns would be at stake if the quest for definition was abandoned? And what exactly fuels the scientific outlook to cherish academic definitions of religion? There are indeed scientists of religion, who are of the opinion that we can live happily in their absence, and there are even those that are opposed in entertaining any definition. Not unlikely, the proponents of this opinion can be found among anthropologists, who are probably most fully aware of the cultural varieties in beliefs and practices and the rather explicit boundaries that this bewildering variety of religious forms of meaning sets to the discriminating and demarcating functions of what is after all a Western scholarly concept. Thus, in his well-known classic '*The Meaning and End of Religion*', scholar in comparative religion, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, proposes to abolish the concept of religion altogether, both for scholars and those of faith, since it is not an intelligible entity in itself. In the course of history, the interpretation of the term religion developed from personal piety to a normative ideal, into an external phenomenon and finally amounted to a generic concept. However, taking note of the wide variety of its cultural and historic variants of meaning and corresponding interpretations, the term religion is now a category that is simply unfit for scholarly inquiry (Smith 1991, 119-153). If, however, 'faith' is the more proper term to define, as Smith maintains, the quest for universal definitions continues by all means. Thus, Asad observes that Smith's solution to replace the term 'religion' with 'faith' suffers from his severe rejection of reifying tendencies in attempts to define religion. This — so says Asad — prevents Smith to sufficiently acknowledge that apart from religions' presence in our mind ('faith') there is religion out there, embedded in a cumulative tradition characterised by practices and objects, collective rituals and political entities (Asad 2001, 213-217). Another example expresses a similar point of view, and is brought forward by Timothy Fitzgerald, who criticises the concept of religion as being non-existent, because it is not to be found as a distinctive cross-cultural reality. Since any concept depends heavily on specific characteristics of cultural beliefs and practices, any overarching notion of religion is simply an ideological tool in the hands of scholars in religious

studies to serve whatever interest that they cherish. According to Fitzgerald, the concept of religion is infused by an ecumenical theology that even established scholars, like Smart or Geertz, are not fully able to avoid. Whilst there can be good reasons to maintain a disciplinary status to theology, religious studies should be reframed in terms of cultural studies (Fitzgerald 2000, 235-251; Stone 2001). However, as Saler remarks, to trade in religious for cultural terminologies does not escape the issue of conceptualising the far more complex term 'culture' (Saler 2001). Thus, indeed there are scholars that maintain that religion cannot and should not be defined in global or universal terms. They bring to the fore arguments that any term is simply limited to what a particular language, specific carrier-group, or certain history and lived culture offers as horizon of understanding. However, there are also scholars that hold quite the opposite view, maintaining that true knowledge is only possible through comparison of religions. Among them is founding father of comparative religion, Friedrich Max Müller, whose famous *maxim* with regard to the study of religion ran: '*Wer eine (Religion) kennt, kennt keine*' (translated as: One who knows only one (religion), knows none (Müller 1873, 16). Thus, the simple assertion is that if religious plurality is taken as an object of study, be it theologically or in terms of religious studies — a definition of religion is imperative. Asad's and Salers' observations illustrate that even the rejection to engage in defining religion confronts one with similar contingencies in a subsequent definition of alternative terms. This contingency invites the development of definitions or methodical perspectives that do justice to the religious varieties in forms of meaning. These are, on the one hand, relative to their contextual terminologies-in-use, but, on the other hand, require types of definition that do not altogether exclude generic claims about the analysis and comparison of religious beliefs and practices.

A basic motive to engage in the discussion of religious definition is obviously the need of demarcation, given the phenomenological fact of variety within and between religions. Whilst there are compelling arguments in pursuing definitions of religion as such, it can be doubted if universal definitions represent a viable option. So-called monothetic or Aristotelian definitions, which pertain to a single basic idea or principle, classify religious beliefs and practices in terms of the presence of all of a set of attributes. The phenomenology of religious experience and expression, as studied in comparative religion, demonstrates that this allows the pinpointing of general characteristics. However, it also fails to be inclusive of the interesting variants within and among religions. Polythetic definitions, in contrast, are not oriented towards identity, but towards similarity, as they describe characteristics that are neither necessary, nor sufficient. This latter definition 'by family resemblance' does not exclude

a 'prototypical' characterisation of a religion, but also takes into account the Wittgensteinian view of '*Familienähnlichkeit*'. That paradigm holds that our language-use is a selective device that is not merely programmed to analytically demarcate exclusive concepts, but is primarily oriented at expressing similarities, as a result of various overlapping patterns of thought. Saler, in his classic '*Conceptualizing Religion*' takes on the challenge to define religion in a way that adopts both common notions of religion and scholarly views in such a 'family resemblance' type of definition. Whilst acknowledging that the study of religion cannot avoid some kind of ethnocentrism in taking a particular religion as prototypical, Saler adopts definitions in which religious beliefs and practices are to be compared to some, but not necessarily all, defining characteristics (Saler 1993; Wiebe 1995). Saler argues that definitions of religion should have central tendencies and not an essence as profiling characteristic. However, he interestingly puts this into perspective, by referring to cognitive research that points at a competing insight, namely that people tend to believe in and practice concepts as if they have essences. Such an 'essentialist mode of thought' should then not so much be considered a typical relic of Western thought, but instead as a biologically-engrained universal that characterises the human condition (Saler 2008, 224).

If the need to define religion cannot be bypassed, whilst acknowledging the fact that the multitude of religious expressions allows merely the determination of similarities, an obvious next step is to look into this process of establishing similarities between religious beliefs and practices and prototyping its patterns of meaning. The issue here is not what these similarities or prototypes are — which would reintroduce the latter issue of definition —, but should address the question how the beliefs and practices that are commonly referred to as religious become expressed. Since not the material, but the formal object of definition is at stake here, hermeneutical procedures of interpretation cannot already be introduced to solve the issue. Here, the issue simply is how religious forms of meaning come to be understood as such. Modelling theory in semiotic analysis represents one approach to describe this process, since it offers a vocabulary to comprehend prototyping based on interpreting similarities. Modelling can be understood as a capacity present in the brain: an '*innate ability to produce forms to represent objects, events, feelings, actions, situations and ideas perceived to have some meaning, purpose or useful function*' (Sebeok and Danesi 2000, 196). Thomas Sebeok adapted from the so-called Tartu-Moscow School in Semiotics, a distinction in levels of modelling that may be helpful in distinguishing forms of meaning (Petrilli and Ponzio 2005). Amongst these are primary-, secondary- and tertiary modelling that for this purpose can

be applied to religious signs, texts, codes and metaphors. Primary modelling is the innate capacity to simulate; a process that characterises any organism that has a biological life-plan, which makes it fit to interact with its environment at levels of perception and interaction (Kull 2010). Here, meaning is a structure ingrained in an organism that serves a specific referential domain. It includes natural signs (bodily sensations), signals that arouse stimuli in a receiver; icons that display resemblance between form and referent; indexes that refer to a context; symbols that display meaning apart from a stimulus-response context; and names that explicitly serve identification (Sebeok 2001, 42-60). This primary modelling theory allows the study of religion at the basic level of perception, where its elementary forms can be researched in terms of religious language characteristics and actual cues of ritual behaviour. Secondary modelling extends the production of meaning by putting the forms of meaning into a significant pattern or order by connotation, linking or modification. Obviously, this includes learned basic behaviour according to which language applies to speech, and text or behaviour is put into practice with the help of media and communication techniques. Religion is studied here at a level of religious texts and discourse, and of formalised ritual expression. Tertiary modelling raises the complexity of signification, in that the forms of meaning from secondary modelling gain symbolic value, and constitute paradigmatic meaning. It is here where culture is most clearly visible in the way code and convention guide the interpretation of the forms of meaning. Here, religion is studied as an abstract symbol based system of meaning, where religious language expressions and speech, ritual cues and expressions are understood from their symbolic or metaphoric structures of coherence over the centuries.

A semiotic approach to the study of religion that takes into account the distinct levels of meaning represents one way of analysing its beliefs and practices. This examined process of signifying, i.e. establishing a relationship between signs, texts, codes or metaphors and their meaning, avoids that the notion of religion is locked in as merely a matter of definition. Whilst it is true that religious signification obviously assumes identification of its adjective; the emphasis lies on the properties of forms of meaning, such as their paradigmaticity (recognition), syntagmaticity (combination), analogy (equivalence), synchronicity (comparison in time), or diachronicity (comparison over time). It assumes semiotic competence, which can be defined as the ability to perceive religious phenomena as signs, to invent and transmit them, and store them in support of interpretative habits (Johansen & Larsen 2005, 28-31). Semiotics has particular value for the study of religion, since it highlights a concern for signs-in-use within religious cultures and institutions, and explains the transformation of their meaning and acts of signification (Van Tillo 1983).

For instance, semiotics may demonstrate the use of natural-, conventional-, and historical signs in Christian doctrine, and clarify why and how topics in the Catholic Church become controversial due to a gained polysemy of particular signs (Ashley 1993). One of the advantages of a semiotic approach is its relative methodical independence in regard of its objects of study. Texts, events, rituals, emotions, situations, or beliefs can be studied between cultures and at different times in history, making comparison focal to the study of religion. The interdisciplinary relevance of semiotics and its capacity to analyse a huge variety of issues in the scientific domain is another argument to favour semiotics as a basic descriptive and comparative tool in the study of religion (Posner, Robering, and Sebeok 1996).

Patterns of Power

In discussing a scholarly motive to engage in definition, one easily oversees that in definition, groups are addressed that have epistemological concerns themselves. In the case of religion, where beliefs and practices are considered crucial to the human condition, this observation is of core significance. As a basic criterion of religious definition, the interpretation counts of those that employ the definition, each according to its use, relevance and role. Ownership and agency of the interpretation are foci, especially when religion is experienced as 'core conviction' or considered to be 'common practice'. Three types of these epistemological concerns can be characterised that are closely related to specific types of definitions cherished by particular groups that can be considered to 'own' definitions of religion in their appropriation of a specific set of interpretations. Subsequently, since there is a notion of agency involved that determines and qualifies the interpretation, these concerns need to be studied with help of proper methodical tools in the assessment of the respective beliefs and practices.

A first epistemological concern is to do justice to the interpretations of those that consider themselves as religious, and as believers or practitioners of a religion. The basic fact that 'religion is present' by all means depends on those that interpret the actual forms of meaning as valid triggers of beliefs and practices that they consider to be significant to their lives. This concern refers to the laity who represent a huge momentum of popular religion, including both typical folk elements of ethnic or regional embedment, and the types of piety that arise from specific places or persons that apparently reflect religion in an exemplary or 'grassroots' form. Academic definitions of religion may suffer from an ambition to be all inclusive, but it can be properly assumed that

this does not bother ordinary people who share an embedded vocabulary that enables them to interpret — or even simply cling on to — holy texts, cherish spiritual beliefs and practice church rituals in the effort of making sense of their life-world. Those of faith may have all sorts of reasons to be religious: albeit out of habit, because of argued choice, or since it offers opportunities to deal with current contingencies in their lives. In any case, they will be happy to refer to that in terms of the actual significance that religion has for their environment at a given moment. Here, descriptive definitions can be helpful that have a simple ostensive aim and indexical function, which allocates religion in the 'here' or 'there' positions of peoples' lives. Religion will be less elaborated in highbrow terminologies of scholarly or clerical officials, but instead formulated in the vocabularies of ordinary people that help them to interpret their life-world. This characterises a need for definition for which description in many cases suffices: definitions will tend to be more idiographic, meaning-oriented, pragmatic, and contextual or emic. Phenomenological, anthropological, and narrative approaches in the so-called 'living religion' approach of religion, illustrate the basic significance of exploring the actual vocabularies in which religion simply acts as indexical reference to the role it has in making sense of the fortuitousness or contingency of peoples' everyday lives, inspired by their local culture (Luther 1992; McGuirre 2008; Streib et al 2008).

A second epistemological concern in entertaining religious definitions is one of cultural and institutional needs. We do not stumble on religions by coincidence, but we are from the outset — at least to considerable extent — religiously socialised according to prescriptive aims regarding its beliefs and practices. There are at least three sides to this presence of prescriptive definitions: religious definitions can be considered normative, enactive and suggestive. A first side to institutional definitions of religion regards the normative aim of definition, which may be more passive as in experiencing a certain spiritual culture in which one is embedded, or active as in practicing the behavioural requirements of a religion, or even outright suffering when the institutional setting of a religion forces to accept certain assumptions or prescriptions, even if these are not shared. By definition, the concerns that we consider to be of crucial importance gain an authoritative status due to tradition, law, charisma or argument. That is especially so in the case of religions where certain beliefs and practices are considered of primordial significance to personal identity and as closely linked to the fate of a community. Usually, these definitions are called 'normative', since they instruct on the basis of self-evident obligations and established duties (deontology), or are motivated by visions of the good life (teleology). However, the function of definition here is not merely to elaborate the reference to what one should believe and how ritual should

be practiced — which in the end is considered evident in itself — but especially to offer conceptual milestones in the handing over of religious capital between the generations to safeguard the continuity of its cultural memory. Secondly, this type of definition typically relates to role-sets that establish and coordinate relationships of formal display by role-carriers and social expectations of role-senders. Religious organisations are considered normative institutions, in which specific creeds and ritual instructions have an 'official' character that defines clerical repertoires and corresponding social expectations. This relationship is maintained by religious definitions that guarantee a perennial validity of beliefs, or an enduring reliability of ritual. This is demonstrated in canonical definitions that present a standard of orthodoxy or excellence considered authoritative, be it by law or creed. As a rule, these canonical definitions are 'owned' by clerical functionaries, church officials and seminary theologians, who cherish concepts of faith and rite that are in line with established role-sets required for proper representation and serving the beliefs and practices from their respective creed. However sophisticatedly these canonical definitions are represented and interpreted, an acknowledged ownership remains dependent on the social ascription of the respective clerical role-sets. Thirdly, there is a 'make-believe'-side to religious definitions that invites, persuades or compels to accept certain definitions of religion as valid expressions of truth and as reliable standards for what one should do or abstain from. The obvious fact that religious officials do so with the spiritual well-being of the faithful and their communities in mind, turns canonical definitions into persuasive ones, in which the psychological states of the audience to whom the definition is presented, is implicitly or explicitly addressed to increase the plausibility of an objective truth of beliefs and personal relevance of practices. Thus some among them come to be considered as '*virtuosi*', 'holy men' or female saints, demonstrating that religion is not merely a transcendent norm, but is actually within reach in daily life.

Finally, a third epistemological concern is of a public nature, where the need of defining religion arises from a political motive to deal with the fact that religions represent potentially diverging worldviews that challenge unitary conceptions of society. Public definitions of religion are important to demarcate claims of state and church, whilst guaranteeing freedom of religion and tolerating its varieties of expression in belief and worship. Put in this way, it becomes obvious that definitions of religion are a product of the Enlightenment. They involve a conception of the constitutional state and appeal to the kind of rationality and liberalism that is typical for Western states (Asad 1993; 2011). This is not merely a historic observation, but one of systematic significance for the definition of religion as such. In Europe, states

have endorsed Christian beliefs and practices in coalitions dating back to the Roman Empire. These coalitions have survived over the ages, if in mitigated form, and in a wide variety of cultural- and national expressions. Europe suffered religious wars that ultimately were appeased in stately guaranteed treaties of mutual respect and demarcation of church and state claims, which resulted in a strong, if implicit consciousness of sharply demarcated religious and secular realms in society. The main characteristic of public definitions of religion is that they are rational and can be understood and maintained without affirming their creed or endorsing their piety. The resulting fact that publicly-owned definitions of religion are secular does not imply that they are superior to canonical ones, or for that matter, less dependent on living worldviews. Asad rightfully observes that this 'secularism' is a 'Siamese twin' to religion and that its definition assumes metaphysical assumptions in a preference for the world as 'a single epistemic space'. Furthermore, the scientific reconstruction of religion supports an 'enlightened morality' that is one amongst many others, and one that implicitly or explicitly views religion as threat to a tolerant political realm and requires public defence of some kind (Asad 2001, 221). Thus, the public definition of religion serves specific state interests that are highly dependent on an assumed secular identity, even if that seems even harder to define than religion itself (Casanova 2013). What remains is a basic characteristic of religion as a concept that epistemologically competes with 'secularity', without which any discussion of a valid conception of religion seems futile.

The epistemological concerns that are reflected in popular-, canonical- and public definitions of religion — owned by laity, clergy and public officials respectively — share an interpretative arena. Interpretations do not necessarily compete, nor naturally display an overlap. It highly depends on history and context, whether or not a consensus is displayed that is deemed desirable, putative or authoritative. What can be observed, however, is that a study of religious interpretation in principle fits a humanities approach of empirical theology. Typically, empirical research in religion should be geared towards knowledge and insight into the indicated realms of 'religious ownership', and especially towards the patterns of power that govern the interpretative arena. In this respect, the interpretative interaction between popular-, canonical- and public definitions corresponds to a social one between the laity, clergy and public officials that each have agendas that are not necessarily shared between, or for that matter, within these groups. Various stakeholders may cherish interests intrinsic or extrinsic to their role-sets that reflect patterns of mutual influence at varying levels of cogency and dominance. Even if this turns the question of measuring belief and practice into a fluid issue, it also

focuses on an often overlooked characteristic in defining religion, namely the agency of interpretation as its basic condition. Interpretation is, first of all, an act that not only assumes some level of intentionality, self-reflection and argued choice, but is also highly dependent on social perceptions and expectations. It assumes that people are discursive agents constructing themselves in the world by a quest of identity. Herein, agency has both individual and collective means of control that lead to private- and public forms of identity display (Harré & Gillett 1994; Harré 1998; Archer 2004). Elsewhere, this has been illustrated in terms of a religious identity quest, to be researched with the help of narrative techniques (Schilderman 2002). Narrative method, indeed, typically highlights the illocutionary act that represents the intentionality of meaning as a basic speech act (Bruner 1990). However, it easily fails in bringing to light the interactions of power that guide the communication. One of the methods that provides more justice to the agency perspective is discourse-analysis, which is capable of identifying the interactions in epistemological concern and their underlying patterns of power. In the relevant literature, three versions of discourse-analysis are distinguished. The first approach is one of structural linguistics or formal semantics that is aimed at identifying the communication functions that govern a given text. It shows how language works at the level of words, sentences and utterances, and it does so with the help of analytical linguistic tools (Schiffrin, Tannen & Hamilton 2001). The second approach is conversation analysis, which requires coding of a text at levels of interaction, prose, genre and frames. Here, the social context of discourse is at focus, together with the social procedures according to which meanings come to be enacted in creating a sense of reality and identity. It, for instance, clarifies how religious markers in ethnic communication contribute to a sense of cultural identity (Barker & Galasinski 2001, 122-155). The third approach is known as critical discourse analysis with its own emphasis on the enactment of dominance relationships in social- or institutional interaction. Typically, legitimisation strategies are clarified that rule the construction of reality (Van Dijk 1993; Wodak & Meyer 2001). On the whole, these three types of analysis provide the study of religion with a means to analyse the communication processes within and between owners and stakeholders of certain beliefs and practices, and always with an emphasis on clarification of power patterns. It exceeds the level of analysing forms of meaning in that it does not merely describe, classify and compare the basic elements of religious expression, but goes beyond that in emphasising the social effects of linguistic strategies that define our reality. For instance, a sermon that is read by a clerical official before a faithful audience with the aim to challenge a secular public is not an unlikely phenomenon. It, however, entails a complex frame of implicit definitions of beliefs

and practices that both maintains a religiously stratified reality with strong exclusive role distinctions, which allows a pursuit of certain religious interests. At the level of linguistic analysis, an application can clarify a sermon's intrinsic structure, whilst at the level of conversation analysis, the sermon can be analysed for its listener effects. Moreover, a critical analysis can highlight the implicit strategic moves in a sermon and thus bring to light suggestive speech that seriously threatens the listener's autonomy, or that creates social tensions among the audience.

Claims of Justification

The latter reference to critical discourse analysis as a methodical means to ascertain the various concepts of religion amongst its representatives in view of their roles, interactions and strategies, can easily result in the misunderstanding that this suffices in clarifying the issue of religious definition. However, definitions of text, belief and ritual contain normative claims that cherish certain procedures of justification. This is not merely a technical conception of what counts to whom as significant — as in clarifying forms of meaning —, or whose communication strategy can be exposed — as in discourse analysis. Most typically, a humanities approach to defining religion attempts to argue the validity of certain propositions and beliefs, or the reliability of performing certain rituals. This kind of explanation not only requires an exposition of what is true or required in a religion, but also how one comes to believe that; the latter emphasising the norm that acceptance of truth, rightness, or beauty is not only a regulative idea but a personal responsibility as well that requires some form of attestation or testimony. What is more, in making normative claims, an actor or community not only cherishes epistemic propositions, but above all, invokes rights to be included in the larger society by disclosing arguments that appeal to public reason. It is here, where claims of ultimacy or unconditional obligations that account for the persuasive intelligibility of a particular religion, must be consistent with reasons convincing those beyond the boundaries of particular religious community (Trigg 1998; 2007). That being said, justification in these terms remains both a variable and a matter of argument. It introduces epistemological issues regarding foundation of knowledge, whilst it also requires hermeneutic reflection and discursive interpretation that depends on history and context. Thus, the remaining issue here is that a humanities' approach in empirical theology has to deal with concerns regarding the diverging claims of justification. In dealing with this,

at least three formal positions can be distinguished, referring to a positive, a rational-critical and an emancipatory account.

A first account in justifying a concept of religion is positive and includes a propositional account of religious belief, claiming the validity of a religions' beliefs and practices. In defining religion, literature usually addresses two 'traps' in this regard. The first is the 'essentialist trap', in which, the substance of a religion, that is, its reference to a discriminating subject 'out there', is usually considered a metaphysical or supernatural reality that turns the reference into a 'real' and therefore justified definition. Theological definitions of religion are often criticised for their substantive reference to supernatural matters, assuming the proof that still needs to be ascertained. These essentialist definitions focus on indispensable and universal characteristics of religion set apart from experience. They assume explanations of beliefs and practices that remain immune to the empirical varieties of their expression. Their normative assumptions regarding tenets of a particular religion encapsulate the academic discussion in speculative questions, so it is said. Compared to essentialist concepts of religion, functionalist definitions remain popular in interdisciplinary research. They, however, represent a 'functionalist trap' in focusing solely on the role that religion has for exogenous mental and social mechanisms. Religion is not conceptualised with the aim of contributing to a theory of religion, but merely represents one of many variables serving theories from other scientific disciplines. Ancient themes of suffering and salvation come to be understood as coping mechanisms. Professing one's faith in Church is a function of social cohesion. Spiritual tradition is a structure of maintaining and repairing cultural values. Even though functional definitions of religion boost interdisciplinary research, they may lead to a collapse of empirical theological research into social sciences and fail to address any justification claim at all. An exemplary attempt to avoid both these traps in conceptualising religion, is to apply a positive justification theory from ethics to religion, namely the 'good reasons approach'. Characteristic in this approach, is the attempt to subject prejudice, coercion or proselytism to a discourse in which only the better rational argument counts, whilst the contingencies that may hamper the quality of discourse or that impedes the participants' contribution, are addressed. This practical approach to a positive understanding of religion safeguards from both subjectivism and absolutism in providing justice to context- or field-dependent modes of case-based argumentation (Toulmin 2001, 155-174; 2003). It can be objected that this approach to justification remains limited to individual beliefs or practices, and that it thus lacks a theoretical stance. However, it does offer insight into the significance of a 'family resemblance

approach' to the definition of religion, which allows a positive explanation of religious claims from grounds, warrants, backings and rebuttals.

A second account in justifying a concept of religious belief and practice is critical-rational and closely connected to the dissatisfaction that philosophers like Neurath and Popper, expressed regarding claims of foundationalism in the positivist empirical sciences, and even broader in moral- and political issues of society. The critical-rational, or fallibilist logic concedes that knowledge claims should be subjected to severe tests aimed at falsification, thus offering the best proof of the claims' ability to stand this criticism. Thus any concept, theory or hypothesis cannot be taken as positive confirmation of its claim regarding reality as such, but retains its character of probability. The extent to which this testing remains immune to the claim, the more informative, explanatory and parsimonious it is (Popper 2002). This 'Popperian' account to justification is broadly accepted and remains dominant in the empirical sciences, as is reflected in the quantitative approaches in empirical theology as well (Schilderman 2012). There are various ways to highlight the significance of this principle for the concept of religion. A first notion in taking this fallibilism seriously, says that the concept of religion in empirical research must not offer a foundational account of religious beliefs and practices of some kind. The epistemic norm here requires maximum probability, not absolute certainty. Furthermore, the ultimate objects of these beliefs and practices as concepts — God, spirits, and transcendent realities — are *ipso facto* inaccessible to empirical verification, or, for that matter, falsification. That point of departure is not inacceptable in theological terms. For instance, the classical notion of '*Deus absconditus*' (the hidden God) has a regulative meaning to safeguard from any spell-bound that encapsulates the experience of transcendence in a conceptually preoccupied mind-set. Finally, the critical-rational approach does not only have epistemic significance, but acts as a normative standard as well in dealing with the concept of religion. Popper also applied his falsification approach in methodology to social philosophy, criticising teleological approaches of history that inevitably lead to absolutism. Popper favours liberal democracy instead, as best match to a piecemeal engineering effort of learning from mistakes; an effort that contributes to an open society (Popper 1999; 2013). In search of what religion is, and especially in the arena of its stakeholders, a normative stance of self-criticism, procedural neutrality, and egalitarianism is required. Even though an application of Poppers approach to religion can be criticised for not allowing positive affirmation of beliefs and practices, and not quite properly dealing with the issue of truth, it safeguards from reifying religions to unquestioned traditions that are said to be guided by a presumed necessary course of history.

Finally, a third account in which the concept of religion is justified is emancipatory. This approach allocates the issue of religious definition in the setting of justice, albeit in the historic variant of Enlightenment that favours rational autonomy ('*Ausgang des Menschen aus seiner selbstverschuldeten Unmündigkeit*'), motivated by a liberal setting of freedom from patterns of power, and aimed at discursive agreement, equality and fairness. As the major example of this approach, Habermas' view of religion can be referred to. The notion of religion is by no means focal in his work, but at least three of his views can be mentioned in this regard (Habermas 2006; Reder and Schmidt 2010; Mendieta 2013). The first one can undoubtedly be located in Habermas' effort to clarify a genealogy of rationality, in which religion represents an archaic predecessor of what in the end is a rational responsibility to make sense of our life-world and offer a cultural binding force of society. At some distance from Poppers concern not to engage in historic teleological reasoning, Habermas tries to understand the development of society as a learning process, in which religion happens to be more of a necessary preceding phase than a contemporary relevant contribution. Secondly, religion has a unique function in society in its ability to offer a culture of consolation regarding contingencies such as ultimate death, innocent suffering, unrecompensed injustice, unfulfilled need, tragic loss and so on. This function of religion to 'mend the irreparable' is at odds with the capacities that characterise secular rationality, but must nevertheless be accepted as the inescapable program of any religion, even if it may in some contexts have lost its obvious characteristic of offering a socio-cultural glue to society. Finally, religion represents an — in Habermas' earlier work seriously neglected — contribution to public discourse ('Offentlichkeit') in offering motivation and critique on prevalent ideologies (Habermas 2002). In engaging Rawls on this issue, Habermas tries to find a balanced view regarding religions' contribution to a liberal and post-metaphysical society as it invests its resources in the life-world, critically engages non-religious citizens, protects its identity, and addresses counter-democratic tendencies in society (Habermas 2008, 114-147).

These three accounts do not offer opportunities for more clear-cut definitions of religion, and in fact they may stand far from the empirical-theological practice of studying beliefs, texts and rituals. However, they also present a challenge to a successful yield of this empirical practice: how are these results to be interpreted, not only before academia, but also facing an increasingly post-secular public audience? Thus, these accounts contribute to aims of research in religion and foster a critical examination of its empirical results.

Outlook

This contribution aimed to discuss some basic characteristics of a humanities approach by clarifying a version of empirical theology that studies the interpretation of the 'human element' in life and the religious opportunities to bestow it with meaning. Knowledge of, and insight into this interpretation-process is focal to a discipline that studies self-reflected religion, which through its beliefs and practices, aims to understand its relevance for each age and context. In looking back to this contribution, what can be concluded? In the following, some theses will be presented that — by way of summary — advocate this approach.

A humanities version of empirical theology can hardly be regarded a discipline that is encapsulated in a confessional horizon of understanding its object. Whilst it is clear that any religious pre-understanding cannot be avoided; the fact remains that beliefs and practices are plural notions, both within and between religions. In order to scientifically describe and compare these religious expressions as basic elements of interpretation, their characteristics can best be studied as signs-in-use that derive their phenomenological coherence as models at various levels of analysis. As indicated, a semiotic approach offers proper conditions for describing and comparing beliefs and practices within and between religions. An overarching definition of religion is, at this point, not helpful, but a family-resemblance approach is, as it results from a process of establishing similarities in religious beliefs and practices and of prototyping its patterns of meaning. Furthermore, a semiotic approach may not only act very well as an integrative approach within the theological discipline, but it also draws the classic discipline of comparative religion and its updated versions in religious studies closer to the basic issues of interpretation. That being said, a semiotic approach in empirical studies is mostly helpful as an analytical tool without too much theoretical ambition. It is most helpful if kept limited to analyses in descriptive and comparative research. However, up until now, its significance for empirical theology remains seriously underestimated.

Building from the semiotic account that identifies forms of meaning in religious beliefs, texts and practices, the discursive account offers a following step that focuses on the necessity to study the dynamics of plurality in exchanging forms of meaning. One research strategy is to distinguish groups that hold typical claims of ownership regarding religious beliefs, texts and practices. Here, definitions of religion act as culturally assigned and transferred notions, the interests of which are socially promoted by specific networks, groups and institutions. Processes of appropriation, display, and publication, communication of beliefs, texts and ritual are to be empirically described as characteristics of

laity, clergy and public officials, to name the basic stakeholders in the debate about religion. However, the interactions within and between these groups are also important, since they implicitly or explicitly represent consensus and dissensus that is at force at a given time and context. Discourse analysis is a proper approach and analytical tool to empirically clarify how these processes work at levels of personal and group interaction, and especially, how patterns of power fuel and steer these interactions. What is more, discourse-oriented research may very well be helpful in putting the ideological distinction between religious and secular domains into perspective by clarifying the actual blends of religious definitions that result from these interactions.

The emancipatory account of defining religious beliefs and practices has the research results from the semiotic and discursive account as its condition. Without it, claims of justification would remain speculative propositions that lack an empirical clarity about their meaning in daily life and their ideological function in discourse. The emancipatory approach builds upon that by putting the issue of religious definition in the normative setting of validating the claims that any religion hosts and propagates. The empirical aspects have been addressed in semiotic and discourse analyses and they draw a fine line in facing the normative issues that any approach to religion in humanities cannot bypass. Claims of justification must not be underestimated, since they define who we are and what we value, and therefore to a great extent determine the choice of problems that an empirical researcher in theology addresses. Thus, definitions of religious beliefs and practices require abilities to be positively affirmed, to stand critical tests and to contribute to open public discourse. These requirements can be assumed to be present in the aims of current research programmes in empirical theology. To develop their humanities focus, remains one of its vital ambitions.

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